

EVALUATING COVERT ACTION – A CASE STUDY OF IRAN 1953-2020

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Abstract

Evaluation of covert action has been scarcely discussed in academic literature and where it has been there lacks consistent agreement. Methods of evaluation can encompass achievement of presidential policy, operational implementation, long-term strategic implications, ethical alignment, and the resulting human cost. This paper proposes a framework which centers on the immediate achievement of presidential policy as the first criterion; the operational implementation as the second; and the long-term implications as the third. Together, these criteria represent a framework to evaluate covert action allowing for an overall assessment. To address the third criterion of long-term strategic implications, the case of covert action in Iran is examined over the period of 1953-2020. This case study is limited by access to open source material from books, journal articles, speeches, legal filings, and declassified material sourced from the CIA FOIA database. Additionally, discussion avoids the actions of other actors such as British SIS, Israel's MOSSAD, and the Soviet Union. What emerges in the case is an interwoven story of covert actions addressing different strategic interests, policy objectives, and operational implementation methods that complicate evaluation. There are clear failures in Iran-Contra and Operation Merlin, but also clear successes in Operation Olympic Games and the assassination of Qasem Soleimani. Where the discussion is inconclusive is Operation Ajax, which is successful regarding the first two criteria but is the center of debate for long-term implications. However, this paper argues that due to the 26-year time horizon between Operation Ajax and the Islamic Revolution this long-term failure is driven by U.S. foreign policy that failed to reign in the Shah. The other conclusion that emerges is that covert action tends to be most successful when it is closely tied to clear presidential policy and not used as a replacement for policy.

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Public Release Approval	iii
Introduction	p. 1
Covert Action – Literature Review.....	p. 1
Role & Purpose.....	p. 1
Types of Covert Action.....	p. 2
Oversight & Congress	p. 4
How to Evaluate: Success or Failure.....	p. 6
Predicted Conclusion	p. 11
Hypothesis.....	p. 11
Method.....	p. 11
Data.....	p. 12
Operation Ajax.....	p. 13
Iran-Contra	p. 17
Operation Merlin	p. 21
Operation Olympic Games	p. 23
Targeted Assassination of Qasem Soleimani	p. 26
Discussion.....	p. 30
Operation Ajax.....	p. 31
Iran-Contra.....	p. 32
Operation Merlin	p. 33
Operation Olympic Games.....	p. 34
Targeted Assassination of Qasem Soleimani.....	p. 35
Conclusion	p. 36
Bibliography.....	p. 38
Curriculum Vitae.....	p. 44

Introduction

How to evaluate covert action has been elusive in literature due to the difficulty in assessing that which is intended to remain in the shadows. The efforts of spymasters and spooks in spreading propaganda, inciting a coup d'état, or even assassinating a leader of a terrorist group is rarely seen by the public or acknowledged by a government. The mystery and level of classification surrounding covert action obfuscates how to evaluate its performance and understanding whether failure is a result of poor policy, poor operational implementation, or whether it is a tool which should be diminished in frequency. This research will attempt to build a case with sufficient breadth of covert action across a period of nearly seven decades targeting a singular adversary to better understand long-term strategic consequences as a component of the evaluative framework. The underlying research question attempting to be addressed is how to determine success or failure of covert action and whether using a framework which incorporates multiple criteria represents a step-forward in this evaluative process.

Covert Action – Literature Review

Role & Purpose

Covert action carries with it a mystique of the unknown or rather meant to be not known. In exploring covert action, it is important to make a distinction between covert action and espionage. Espionage, or spying, is a passive act whereby intelligence officers target and recruit assets from which to glean information which is of value to the interests of their state.¹ This is distinct from covert action which is *active* in nature where the core purpose is to influence outcomes in the favor of the state.² Conjointly, the use of the word *covert* implies how this action

¹ Treverton, *Intelligence for an Age of Terror*, 210.

² Ibid., 210.

undertaken is intended to allow for plausible deniability where the act is not intended to be acknowledged by the United States Government.³

The use of covert action as a tool of international relations has existed for centuries as nation-states have sought to influence the behavior and outcomes of history in their favor.⁴ For the United States, these operations date back to the Revolutionary War, but have been most keenly understood following the establishment of a formal intelligence agency apparatus in the post-World War II environment. The purpose of covert action as an instrument of the executive has often been understood as the “third option” between diplomacy and direct military intervention.⁵ Alternatively, Prados (2006) frames covert action from the perspective of an international relations toolkit including it as one of five options with those being: behavior, diplomacy, economic sanctions, military force, and covert action.⁶ Nevertheless, covert action operates in a middle-ground whereby the president is given an additional option to address the challenges of implementing foreign policy to advance the interests of the United States.

Types of Covert Action

There are three primary veins of covert action in propaganda, political action, and paramilitary operations, with information warfare being a fourth aspect of covert action as technology continues to alter the landscape of intelligence operations in the modern era.⁷ These varying types of covert action can be utilized alone or simultaneously to achieve specific policy objectives, but each has its own benefits and drawbacks.

³ Kibbe, “Covert Action and the Pentagon”, 57.

⁴ Cormac & Aldrich, “Grey is the New Black: Covert Action and Implausible Deniability”, 477.

⁵ Johnson, *National Security Intelligence*, 79.

⁶ Prados, *Safe for Democracy*, 641-645.

⁷ Daugherty, *Executive Secrets: Covert Action & The Presidency*, 76-85.

Propaganda is a widely used covert action which can achieve superior outcomes to other alternatives if there is “sufficient time available for it to work”.⁸ Propaganda is often referred to as either white, grey, or black indicating whether identification of the source is open, opaque, or fabricated.⁹ White propaganda is generally truthful information from official government outlets in order to amplify messaging abroad through explanation of policy, news, and government positions.¹⁰ Grey propaganda blurs the lines between truth and fiction where distortion of fact is a central component of the messaging to support the policy objectives of the government.¹¹ Black propaganda can also be understood as disinformation that it is fabricated to reinforce false perceptions, beliefs, or cause strife.¹² Disinformation and black propaganda have historically been heavily utilized by Russia to heighten fracturing in the U.S. in areas such as racial disparities. Both grey and black propaganda rely on hiding the source to create a perception of the messaging being grassroots in nature where possible reinforcing belief in the message.

Political action encompasses a wide range of activities from funding political campaigns in a foreign country, to providing financial backing for a demonstration, to even instigating coups.¹³ The U.S. successful utilization of political action to spark a coup in Iran in 1953 is an example of how propaganda and political action are often used in conjunction and in support of one another to achieve an outcome. Often political action entails financial support to influence political outcomes in a country. This financial support is often passed through multiple entities to allow it to appear homegrown, so the supported party or individual is not aware of its origin.

⁸ Ibid., 72.

⁹ Ibid, 75.

¹⁰ Ibid., 75.

¹¹ Ibid., 75.

¹² Ibid., 77.

¹³ Ibid., 82.

Paramilitary operations have increased in usage following 9/11 and the shift in focus towards counterterrorism. Examples of paramilitary operations include training of foreign military special forces, providing security to specific VIPs abroad, or even targeted assassination.¹⁴ While assassination was precluded from U.S. covert action in 1976, the authorizations surrounding the post-9/11 environment broadened the scope of activities covered in combatting terrorism and the armed Predator UAV has been widely used to conduct targeted assassination of known and suspected terrorists.

Information warfare (IW) is a more recent part of covert action with many of the activities blurring the lines between propaganda, political action, and paramilitary operations in a digital format.¹⁵ It has enabled a new vector through which a nation-state actor can be targeted with the ability to engage remotely through a plausibly deniable means.¹⁶ Additionally, the lines between signals intelligences (SIGINT) espionage collection activities, covert action via digital means, and traditional military operations have blurred as well with those activities that fall into covert action being defined by their active nature and coverage under Title 10. Stuxnet which emerged out of Operation Olympic Games is a keen example of the advanced capabilities the U.S. has developed in the realm of information warfare operations to inflict damage to an adversary while retaining physical distance and plausible deniability.

Oversight & Congress

Up until the early 1970s, covert action fell under broad language included in the National Security Act of 1947.¹⁷ This boilerplate language provided the legal framework for the Central

¹⁴ Ibid., 84.

¹⁵ Ibid., 87.

¹⁶ Ibid., 88.

¹⁷ Johnson, *National Security Intelligence*, 79.

Intelligence Agency (CIA) as well as authorities under which it conducted all intelligence activities including covert action. The public outcry from the Vietnam War, the Watergate Scandal, and the exposure of the “Family Jewels” which brought to light abuses by the CIA led Congress into action to reign in the conduct of covert action and associated powers of the President.

The Hughes-Ryan Amendment to the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 was the first major step towards reigning in covert action under an oversight structure when passed in 1974.¹⁸ Hughes-Ryan established the requirement of a Presidential Finding, removing plausible deniability that had been a corner stone of covert action.¹⁹ Additionally, Hughes-Ryan established a means which Congress could veto operations due to “authority to authorize and appropriate public funds” which is an express Constitutional authority of Congress.²⁰ In 1980, the Intelligence Oversight Act amended Hughes-Ryan to allow the President to present a Finding in a “timely fashion.”²¹ This concept of timely fashion would be central in discussion on the subsequent Iran-Contra scandal whereby Congress was not notified in advance leading to the passage of the 1988 Intelligence Oversight Act which replaced the “timely fashion” verbiage with a forty-eight hour window.²²

Lastly, the Intelligence Oversight Act of 1991 repealed Hughes-Ryan and put into statute stronger oversight intended to address abuses exposed in Iran-Contra which had circumvented normal processes by running the program out of the White House through the National Security

¹⁸ Daugherty, *Executive Secrets: Covert Action & the Presidency*, 93.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 93.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 93.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 97.

²² *Ibid.*, 97.

Council (NSC).²³ The law stipulated that no Finding could be signed retroactively and was required to be in writing with the President as the final signatory. Furthermore, the Finding must identify the program being outlined is in support of specific “identifiable policy objectives”.²⁴ Additionally, all U.S. agencies which would participate in the program had to be identified as well as any third-parties thereby addressing the circumvention used by the administration in Iran-Contra.²⁵ Lastly, the Act outlined that no operation could influence domestic opinion, policies, media, or political processes and must abide by both the Constitution and federal law.²⁶

How to Evaluate: Success or Failure

How to evaluate the success or failure of covert action is complicated by varying perspectives on *how* it should be evaluated. Treverton (2009) views the attempt at evaluation as speculative in nature rooted, in a retrospective analysis that considers what could have happened *if only* x, y, or z had gone differently.²⁷ Additionally, this retrospective evaluation often makes the failures obvious such as the Bay of Pigs but successes such as Operation Ajax clouded by the events that took place in the decades that followed.²⁸ Any event given enough time loses the context and immediacy of its impact when examined from far enough way and thus those covert actions have been muddled by the subsequent years where the failure may be a result of policy rather than directly tied to the covert action itself. Hulnick (1999) supports this view that judging the action by itself “may miss the long-term implications” and thus makes evaluating covert action more difficult than judging analysis or collection.²⁹

²³ Ibid., 97.

²⁴ Ibid., 98.

²⁵ Ibid., 98.

²⁶ Ibid., 98.

²⁷ Treverton, “Covert Action and Open Society”, 999.

²⁸ Treverton, *Intelligence for an Age of Terror*, 212.

²⁹ Hulnick, *Fixing the Spy Machine*, 78.

One of the most significant challenges associated with covert action is its classified and sensitive nature. The imbedded purpose of keeping the hand of the government hidden whilst influencing other nation-states precludes disclosure to a broad audience of the activities the U.S. is undertaking. This issue of classification has clouded the ability of overseers, academics, and the public to evaluate covert action. Widely known scandals such as the Bay of Pigs and Iran-Contra have dominated discourse on covert action and led to accusations being levied against the CIA of being a “rogue elephant”.³⁰ Even successes such as the raid on Abbottabad to kill Osama Bin Laden are not without their own controversy due to the high-risk nature of the operation and the lack of notification of Pakistan beforehand. Inevitably, covert action has and will continue to be controversial rooted in the paradox of being a democratic nation-state secretly meddling in the affairs of others.³¹

Hulnick (1999) suggests if covert action were evaluated by policymakers, the definition of success or failure would be tied to the outcome of the policy which oversees the action.³² Daugherty (2004) states that a “successful outcome is one in which foreign policy objectives sought by the President are obtained”.³³ This straightforward perspective on evaluating covert action provides a clear line towards evaluation by tying together the initiating purpose of the Finding to the action and then back to whether that policy was achieved. Further exploration is required in instances in which the policy was doomed to fail, and covert action was implemented as a last-ditch effort to save it. Covert action and policy must work in harmony where the overt and covert amplify one another towards a desired outcome. Lowenthal (2009) agrees that the

³⁰ Haines, “Looking for a Rogue Elephant: The Pike Committee Investigations and the CIA”, 5.

³¹ Prados, *Safe for Democracy*, 647.

³² Hulnick, *Fixing the Spy Machine*, 80.

³³ *Ibid.*, 80

success of covert action is intertwined with the underlying policy and more likely to succeed when the policy goals are specific, and the operation is carefully defined.³⁴

A second perspective discussed by Daugherty (2004) is whether the action was “well managed from an operation[al] standpoint”.³⁵ This perspective focuses on the execution of the tradecraft and does not examine whether the policy objective was achieved or not. Hulnick (1999) assesses that the intelligence officer narrows the evaluation towards the operational aspects and disregards the policy it was meant to support. This narrow focus is something Lowenthal (2009) bemoans whereby policymakers lose sight of historic precedent and therefore fail to propose well developed covert action plans which are less likely to fail.³⁶ Similarly, intelligence officers focus on what is in their purview and may lack the proper understanding of both short and long-term strategic policy objectives.

An alternative to these perspectives is that success or failure is best understood from the response of the American public once exposed.³⁷ While public opinion can sway for or against an action and policy simultaneously, it is reliant on disclosure of an action by the media and therefore lacks consistency in not only what is revealed but also to what extent. Connected to the concept of public response, Johnson (2012) discusses how varying types of action are a “ladder of escalation” and the larger question in evaluation is whether operations are ethically acceptable or not.³⁸ Ethical considerations and the response of the public bring into consideration the position of the United States as a proponent of democracy and user of covert action which on the surface appears at odds with democratic values. From the ethical perspective, any covert action

³⁴ Lowenthal, *Intelligence: From Secrets to Policy*, 178.

³⁵ Daugherty, *Executive Secrets: Covert Action & the Presidency*, 5.

³⁶ Lowenthal, *Intelligence: From Secrets to Policy*, 167.

³⁷ Hulnick, *Fixing the Spy Machine*, 80

³⁸ Johnson, *National Security Intelligence*, 104.

incompatible with American ethics is a failure regardless of apparent strategic or operational success. For instance, if the ethical perspective holds that all assassination is wrong, then it would deem the targeted assassination of Osama bin Laden, Anwar Al-Awlaki, and Qasem Soleimani as all failures despite all three being operational successful and supporting specific presidential policy. Determining what ethical code to apply to the evaluative process is unclear and may require further discourse to determine applicability and measurability.

An additional perspective is that long-term impacts must be considered to understand whether an action was a success or not.³⁹ The 1953 coup in Iran which put the Shah in power viewed in 1979 following the revolution seems like a failure. Similarly, the support of the Mujahideen in Afghanistan in the 1980s who would later become the Taliban illustrates a potential for blowback due to poor foresight. The inclusion of a long time-horizon considers the ripple effect of second and third-order effects which is missed when only examining immediate performance. Lowenthal (2009) also considers whether “human costs” should be a part of the evaluative calculus where death tolls in the decades following shape the understanding of the impact felt. It must be considered whether the goal is to evaluate all potential impacts from a covert action by capturing the nuance of the ensuing years or if by doing so the evaluation is diluted by history.

Codevilla (1992) raises the question of whether covert action has impacted the “shape, nature, or condition of the world”.⁴⁰ Restated, if the covert action never happened would the world be any different? This is difficult to answer as one must consider the influence of Soviet active measures and the covert efforts of other nation-states. The continual utilization of covert

³⁹ Daugherty, *Executive Secrets: Covert Action & The Presidency*, 5.

⁴⁰ Codevilla. *Informing Statecraft: Intelligence for a New Century*, 241.

action over a long period of time suggests that policymakers and intelligence officers see value in its implementation and it may be impossible to address whether conflicts such as the Vietnam War, the revolution in Iran, or the War on Terror would have different results without. America's interventionism has long been discussed and debated and thus it is possible the world in which we live today would in fact be different without covert action.⁴¹

Lastly, Executive Order (EO) 12333 offers some insight into how evaluation of covert action is viewed outside of academic literature. However, it is important to note that EO 12333 has been subsequently amended three times with EO 13284 in 2003, EO 13355 in 2004, and 13470 in 2008. The executive order states that the National Security Council (NSC) has the responsibility to “conduct a periodic review of ongoing covert action activities, including an evaluation of the effectiveness and consistency with current national policy.”⁴² The terminology of “current national policy” lacks clarity in whether that is short-term presidential policy or long-term strategic efforts.⁴³ Furthermore, the inclusion of the term “effectiveness” seems most closely aligned with operational implementation although it focuses most bluntly on whether the action is or is not working as intended.⁴⁴ This periodic review process illuminated in the language of the text is insightful in that the NSC has access which outstrips the academic community in terms of proximity to the policymaker as well as to the underlying classified material which underpins the action.

⁴¹ Daugherty, *Executive Secrets: Covert Action & The Presidency*, 6

⁴² Executive Order 12333 of December 4, 1981. “United States Intelligence Activities,” *Code of Federal Regulations*, title 3 (1981): 200-216.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

Predicted Conclusion

Policymakers have long tended to believe that covert action can be effective in furthering policy objectives. President Carter prior to his ascension to the Presidency was adverse to covert action but became a major proponent. President Obama was critical of President Bush over the Iraq War and his tactics in the “War on Terror”, but proceeded to perform a significantly more drone strikes against terrorists.⁴⁵ Rather, the evaluation often is shades of grey where when viewed in different light it changes the perception. Presidents would not utilize covert action as often as they do if they did not believe it assisted in achieving overt policy objectives. Furthermore, some covert action programs span administrations showing the perceived persistent value over time.

Hypothesis

There are three primary veins this paper will evaluate covert action. First, does the covert action align with and lead to outcomes that are consistent with presidential policy? If the covert action does not lead to furtherance of the proposed policy, then that would denote a failure. The second criterion is the action implemented without major error from an operational perspective. To address the concept of blowback, the third criteria addresses if the action led to long-term policy objectives of the United States. As an example, if an action increased animosity towards the U.S. exhibited through increased Iranian support for terrorist organizations, furthered its nuclear weapons ambitions, or took direct action in response to a covert action that would denote a failure even if that blowback response occurred years later. The nuance to consider in the cases of potential blowback is whether policy decisions in the intervening years were the driving factor

⁴⁵ Treverton, *Intelligence for an Age of Terror*, 231.

rather than the action. Together, these three criteria build a framework from which to address the research question centered on evaluation of covert action. The hypothesis for this research is that covert action will be successful when closely aligned with defined presidential policy, is implemented in line with operational tradecraft, and supports long-term strategic objectives.

Method

The qualitative method utilized is the case study. The case study to be examined is CIA covert action in Iran spanning from 1953-2020 starting with Operation Ajax and ending with the targeted assassination of Qasem Soleimani. The nearly seven decades as well as five covert actions being studied within the case allow significant narrative depth from which to draw conclusions. This paper will present the five covert actions in chronological order. This chronological progression is meant to capture the underlying policy of the presidential administrations as well as provide a narrative discussion on the progression of covert action in Iran over the period. The selected covert actions encompassed in the case are as follows: Operation Ajax, Iran-Contra, Operation Merlin, Operation Olympic Games, and the assassination of Qasem Soleimani.

Data

While much of the covert action surrounding Iran remains classified, this case study utilizes open source material to construct a narrative. The source material spans published books, speeches, journal articles, official reports, newspaper articles, and primary source documents pulled from the CIA's Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) database that has been sanitized and declassified. The utilization of declassified material allows insight into policy objectives and operational background particularly as it relates to Operation Ajax and Iran-Contra. Additionally,

the data is bounded on U.S. action in Iran and does not address open source material on other third-party actors such as SIS or MOSSAD who may have partnered with the United States. Furthermore, the data will focus almost exclusively on covert action while limiting discussion on military action, embargos, sanctions, and other tools of U.S. policy. This bounding of the case study is pivotal to keeping the research study focused and scoped.

Operation Ajax

The end of World War II brought about a restructuring of the global paradigm with the capitalistic United States positioned against the communist Soviet Union in a struggle for global hegemony. The rise of nuclear weapons, the collapse of British imperialism in the years to follow, and the establishment of the Bretton Woods systems would all underpin the ensuing decades of conflict known as the Cold War where the Americans and Soviets would seek to gain dominance through proxies and covert action amongst other tools. The Cold War was not a conflict fought head-to-head but was a game of chess fought in the shadows where ideas such as domino theory and the various Cold War doctrines would come to embody U.S. foreign policy in the post-1945 environment. The focus on presidential administrations from Truman through the first Bush were on toppling the Soviet Union and containing the spread of communism.⁴⁶

In March of 1947, President Truman announced what would become known as the Truman Doctrine where the policy of the U.S. was to “support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures”.⁴⁷ This doctrine was foundational in interventions in Korea and subsequent iterations of the Eisenhower Doctrine, the Nixon Doctrine, and so on where the policy of the United States was to combat the rise of

⁴⁶ Daugherty, *Executive Secrets: Covert Action & The Presidency*, 1.

⁴⁷ Kenneth Thompson, *The Carter Doctrine*, 190.

communism or the appearance of communism globally.⁴⁸ In accompaniment with the announcement to the Truman Doctrine, President Truman would go on to sign the classified NSC 10/2 which authorized the CIA to conduct covert action globally to combat the communist Soviet Union.⁴⁹ In this endeavor, Iran which shared a border with the Soviet Union, had strategic access to the Persian Gulf, and had significant reserves of oil represented a key piece in U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East and Asia.⁵⁰

The Eisenhower administration retained several of the policies implemented during the Truman era.⁵¹ Where Eisenhower differed from his predecessor was that he was more willing “to adopt assertive policies that used a wider range of instruments” including covert action as evidenced by efforts in Iran, Guatemala, and elsewhere.⁵² Despite his prolific military background, Eisenhower leaned heavily on covert action as a means to conduct foreign policy in the midst of the Cold War. This maintained a level of plausible deniability that avoided additional military confrontation and advanced U.S. interests abroad. To this end, Eisenhower enumerated further on the Truman Doctrine by establishing the Eisenhower Doctrine in 1957 following the Suez Crisis whereby a Middle Eastern country could receive economic and military aid to combat threats to those nation-states from “any nation controlled by international communism”.⁵³ This doctrine further established the U.S. efforts of containment against communist spread and identified the strategic value of the Middle East due to its vast oil reserves.⁵⁴

⁴⁸ Klare, “Oil, Iraq, and American Foreign Policy: The continuing Salience of the Carter Doctrine”, 32.

⁴⁹ Little, *Mission Impossible*, 670.

⁵⁰ Marsh, “The United States, Iran, and Operation ‘Ajax’”, 3.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 1.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

The roots of Operation Ajax lie in a dispute that began to surface late in 1948 when the government of Iran invited the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (AIOC), now known as British Petroleum (BP), to renegotiate the terms of the 1933 oil concession which were unfavorable to Iran.⁵⁵ Concern over the loss of revenue to Iran continued to amplify and the British access to Iranian oil was put into severe jeopardy when Prime Minister Mossadegh sought to nationalize Iran's oil in 1951.⁵⁶ Mossadegh's ascension to power and push to nationalize oil posed significant threat to British access of a strategic and lucrative resource.⁵⁷ Although Mossadegh sought to democratize and modernize Iran, he stood at odds with monarch Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, also known as the Shah, due to the potential reduction in authority he would face should those desires come to pass.⁵⁸

In response to nationalization, Britain attempted to get the U.S. to agree to measures which would remove Mossadegh which the Truman administration was not agreeable to. However, Britain began to frame the concern over Mossadegh's nationalization in line with fears of the spread of communism in Iran which fed into concerns the U.S. had regarding the potential domino of nations into socialism.⁵⁹ In light of potential communist influence, Iran represented an increasingly strategic piece of U.S. interests in the Middle East altering the U.S. perception of the issue of Mossadegh.⁶⁰ The British eventually invited Kermit Roosevelt to London where they pitched the plan to overthrow Mossadegh and upon Eisenhower taking office were able to convince the CIA to put implement a plan that would eventually foment a coup.⁶¹

⁵⁵ Marsh, "The United States, Iran and Operation 'Ajax'", 2

⁵⁶ Lomas, "Not-so-secret Operation", 16.

⁵⁷ Morgan, "U.S. – Iran Relations", 1

⁵⁸ Ibid., 1.

⁵⁹ Lomas, "Not-so-secret operation", 16.

⁶⁰ Marsh, "The United States, Iran and Operation 'Ajax'", 3.

⁶¹ Little, "Mission Impossible", 665.

The plan involved spending \$150,000 to bribe individuals such as journalists, preachers, and others who could amplify a message of distrust in Mossadegh's government.⁶² In conjunction, the CIA utilized General Zahedi whom they selected to lead the coup to bribe key government officials with an additional \$11,000 per week. This amplification of distrust in the public sphere coupled with bribery in the government would allow for Parliament to demand Mossadegh's removal and if refused would give General Zahedi the bandwidth to use military means to remove him from power.⁶³ The Shah would then issue a royal decree demanding Mossadegh step-down and installing Zahedi.⁶⁴ However, this plan almost collapsed on August 13, 1953 when Mossadegh refused and instead issued an arrest warrant for Zahedi leading the Shah to flee to Rome.⁶⁵ Ultimately, the CIA was able to mobilize "pro-western elements in the Iranian army" resulting in Mossadegh being deposed on August 19th and the Shah returning to power and cementing U.S. influence in the region for the next 26 years.⁶⁶

The subsequent period under the Shah's rule saw U.S. efforts in covert action expand, largely thanks to the success of Operation Ajax. In this way, the immediate success led to a long-term strategic shift in U.S. intelligence operations and the use of covert action abroad in places such as Guatemala, Cuba, and elsewhere.⁶⁷ While conflict emerged between Israel and Arab nation-states during this period, the U.S. relied on Iran as a means of stability in the region to both oil assets and the prevention of communist encroachment. However, the U.S. was uninterested in reigning in the behavior and corruption of the Shah, eventually leading to a growing distrust and disdain amongst the Iranian citizens as levels of inflation and inequality

⁶² Morgan, "U.S. – Iran Relations", 2.

⁶³ Ibid., 2.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 2.

⁶⁵ Little, "Mission Impossible", 666.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 666.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 666.

continued to rise.⁶⁸ The eventual eruption of student led protests starting in early 1978 ultimately led to a full-scale revolution whereby the Shah was deposed, and the new regime of Ayatollah Khomeini viewed the U.S. as an enemy of Iran.

Iran-Contra

The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran caught the CIA and U.S. leadership by surprise leading to the well-known hostage crisis which would persist for 444 days.⁶⁹ President Carter in the aftermath no longer had an ally but instead a vowed foe chanting “death to America”.⁷⁰ This anti-American sentiment fueled by perceptions amongst Iranians of U.S. interference in their affairs dating back to the 1953 overthrow of Mossadegh and subsequent years of oppression and corruption under the Shah of Iran.⁷¹ Carter in his 1980 State of the Union address first enumerated on what would become known as the Carter Doctrine in declaring that access to oil in the Persian Gulf was of “vital interest” to the United States and any effort to prevent this access would be addressed via “any means necessary”.⁷² This doctrine would become formative U.S. policy which has continued across the past four decades differing from prior doctrines focused on containment of communism that fell aside post-Cold War.⁷³ Nevertheless, Carter’s administration was tainted by its failure to prevent the revolution in Iran and for the subsequent hostage crisis.

President Reagan on ascending to the Presidency had to grapple with many issues, chief amongst them a drastically different Middle East than had been present during the preceding few

⁶⁸ Morgan, “U.S.-Iran Relations”, 4.

⁶⁹ Central Intelligence Agency, “Notes from Our Attic: A Curator’s Pocket History of the CIA”, 64.

⁷⁰ Morgan, “U.S.-Iran Relations”, 5.

⁷¹ Morgan, “U.S.-Iran Relations”, 5.

⁷² Klare, “Oil, Iraq, and American Foreign Policy”, 32.

⁷³ Ibid., 32.

decades. Although the hostages returned just after his inauguration, the 1980s would be marked by terrorism from Shi'ite groups loyal to and backed by Iran throughout the Middle East.⁷⁴ Additional hostage crises took place in Lebanon as well as a devastating terror attack in Beirut in 1983 which killed 241 marines.⁷⁵ The destabilizing efforts of Iran were felt sharply and significant concern surrounded the spread of radical Islamic doctrine which threatened not only U.S. interests but Israeli as well. Furthermore, according to declassified CIA records, the U.S. despite grappling with the spike in terrorism was giving consideration to the path-forward for a potential post-Khomeini Iran given his poor health at the time and belief the regime would fail to persist.⁷⁶

Coupled with the rise of terrorism and radical Islamic theocracy in the Middle East, Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein believed that Iran was in a position of weakness shortly following the revolution and thus launched an invasion in 1980 which would kick off the Iran-Iraq War from 1980-1988.⁷⁷ In the midst of the war, intelligence reports indicated that the Soviet Union was supplying material support to Iraq and thus Iran was on the precipice of defeat.⁷⁸ Additionally, the production of mustard gas and nerve agents by Iraq for use in the war represented a dramatic shift in the conflict violating Geneva Conventions.⁷⁹ In the face of conventional capabilities of Iraq, Soviet support, and chemical weapon usage, Iran was facing a significant uphill battle in winning the war and thus was open to Israeli and U.S. assistance in the form of armaments.⁸⁰ Amongst the armaments needed were American Tube-launched, Optically tracked, Wire-guided

⁷⁴ Woodward, "CIA Covert Action to Continue in Iran After Arms Sales, Influence Sought"

⁷⁵ Woodward, "CIA Covert Action to Continue in Iran After Arms Sales, Influence Sought"

⁷⁶ Fuller, "U.S. Policy Towards Iran: The Post Khomeini Era", 2.

⁷⁷ Marvin, "OPERATION EARNEST WILL", 89.

⁷⁸ Graham Fuller, "Iran – Dwindling Options", 1.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 1.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 2.

(T.O.W) antitank missiles and spare parts for the F-4 Phantom and C-130 transport which could help counter Iraqi conventional forces.⁸¹ The provision of these armaments led to what ultimately would become Iran-Contra.⁸²

For Israel, which had bombed the Iraqi nuclear facility at Osirak in 1980, there was concern that Iraq would turn its attention towards Israel after defeating Iran.⁸³ In addition, U.S. hostages were being held in Lebanon by Iran proxy Hezbollah.⁸⁴ Ultimately, Israeli Director General David Kimche of Israel's Foreign Ministry along with other government officials proposed an exchange of U.S. arms for hostages utilizing Israel as a third party cut-out.⁸⁵ Following the prolonged hostage crisis under the Carter administration, Reagan sought to avoid a similar outcome and thus wanted decisive action to free American citizens abroad.⁸⁶ Reagan's Finding on the action was based on an intent to see a "more moderate Iranian government" and that by providing this support it could change "personnel and attitudes".⁸⁷ However, the action of selling arms to Iran was a risky proposition given strong public opposition towards Iran following the revolution which resulted in the U.S. Embassy hostage crisis.

Where Iran-Contra got into murky legal waters, was the decision that the operation would be run out of the National Security Council (NSC) by Lt. Col. Oliver North and Admiral John Poindexter, the National Security Advisor, instead of the CIA. The decision to run it through the NSC was done to circumvent congressional oversight and keep a tight watch on the operation.⁸⁸ Eventually, North proposed circumventing the Boland Amendment which prevented

⁸¹ Little, "Mission Impossible", 698.

⁸² Walcott and Greenberger. "Officials say policy on Terrorism Intact Despite U.S. Covert Dealings with Iran", 3.

⁸³ Ibid., 3.

⁸⁴ Walcott and Greenberger. "Administration Continues Covert Talks on Freeing U.S. Hostages in Lebanon", 3.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 3.

⁸⁶ Morgan, "U.S.-Iran Relations", p. 7

⁸⁷ Pointdexter, "Covert Action Finding Regarding Iran", 1.

⁸⁸ Woodward, "Reagan Ordered Casey to Keep Iran Mission from Congress".

congressional funding from going to the Contras in Nicaragua by overcharging the Iranians for the TOW missiles and laundering the money through an intermediary.⁸⁹ Once the excess revenue was passed through an intermediary and a Swiss held bank-account, it made its ways to the Contras where the administration was seeking to defeat the Sandinistas backed by the communist Cubans.⁹⁰ The covert support for the Sandinistas had been authorized in a prior Findings in 1981, 1983, and 1986. Eventually, the Iranians discovered they were being severely overcharged for the TOWs and the excess was funding a covert war in Nicaragua; thus, in October of 1986 they leaked the operation to a newspaper in Lebanon.⁹¹ The Iranians were infuriated by the actions of the U.S. and Israel due to perceived hypocrisy and devious intentions by the West.⁹²

Ultimately, the Iran-Iraq war would lead to the loss of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi and Iranian lives, crippling their economies and increasing the distrust of global institutions in Iran following the failure of the U.N. to condemn Iraq following its use of chemical weapons.⁹³ Iran-Contra after its exposure caused a flurry of press attention centered on the White House handling of the affair. The CIA in response to the exposure, released an internal memorandum to all employees which outlined the action and claimed lack of involvement and focused on the efforts of Lt. Col. North.⁹⁴ The ensuing Congressional inquiries could do nothing to fix the damage done to American foreign policy, but they sought to expand oversight putting into place new requirements around Findings, notification, and ability of Congress to restrict covert action through its budgetary control and oversight which persists today.⁹⁵

⁸⁹ Gates, "CIA's Role in the Iranian Initiative", 2.

⁹⁰ Morgan, "U.S.-Iran Relations", 7.

⁹¹ Little, "Mission Impossible", 694.

⁹² Ibid., 694.

⁹³ Rezaei, "Nuclear Proliferation and Rollback: The Complex Case of Iran", 613–632.

⁹⁴ Gates, "CIA's Role in the Iranian Initiative", 3.

⁹⁵ Daugherty, *Executive Secrets: Covert Action & the Presidency*, 93.

Operation Merlin

When the Soviet Union collapsed in late 1991, it shifted U.S. policymaker focus away from traditional Cold War policy towards what that collapse meant for broader strategic goals. Analysis of the strategic threats facing the U.S. were less clear than they had been in the preceding decades as the world was no longer a juxtaposition of two superpowers. Concern rose in the proliferation community that the dissolution of the Soviet Union would lead to increased proliferation. The Communist state provided a level of stability that was no longer present in its collapse and with Iran bordering the now weakened Russia, the possibility of nuclear technology or weapons reaching Iran was one of many concerns in the aftermath.

The post-Cold War environment led successive administrations to be concerned about the strategic threat that Iran represented as well as their destabilizing efforts via state sponsored terrorism. Increasingly, U.S. counterproliferation efforts focused on the chance that rogue nations such as Iran or North Korea would attain nuclear weapon state status. To this end, the U.S. began a heavy sanctions regime as evidenced by the passage of the Iran Sanctions Act of 1996.⁹⁶ These sanctions were the first in a series of eight additional rounds of sanctions from 1996 to 2012 passed in an effort to not only combat proliferation efforts of Iran but their support for terrorism.⁹⁷

To this end, Operation Merlin represented an effort by the Clinton administration to utilize covert action to stall the nuclear ambitions of Iran through industrial sabotage. Through Operation Merlin, the CIA sought to provide flawed blueprints to Iran via a defected Russian

⁹⁶ Chovančík, Martin. 2016. "Iran Coercion Success and the Use of Non-Kinetic Tools", 263.

⁹⁷ Ibid. 263.

scientist.⁹⁸ These blueprints included design flaws which would prevent the nuclear technology from being operational, but those flaws were allegedly obvious enough to be noticed quickly.⁹⁹ Nevertheless, the CIA directed the Russian scientist to provide the blueprints to the Iranians at their embassy in Vienna.¹⁰⁰

James Risen exposed Operation Merlin in his 2006 book, *State of War*, which discussed the operation in detail.¹⁰¹ Additionally, his book included a copy of a letter written to the Iranians from the Russian scientist outlining the nuclear plans provided.¹⁰² Prior to publication of the book, Risen had sought publication of the story while working at *The New York Times* in 2003 and notified the CIA of this intent.¹⁰³ However, Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice implored *The New York Times* to not publish the material out of concern of irreparable damage to national security and exposure of sources and methods.¹⁰⁴ *The Times* agreed to not proceed with publication, but in 2006 with Risen's inclusion of the sensitive material in his book the story was no longer buried. In depositions, Risen stated that his reason for publication was the U.S. failed to provide evidence of WMDs in Iraq and he was seeking to expose faulty intelligence thereby avoiding potential malfeasance and possible war.¹⁰⁵

The U.S. government immediately began investigating potential leaks settling on former CIA Directorate of Operations employee Jeffrey Sterling, who worked at the agency from 1993

⁹⁸ *United States v. Sterling*, 860 F.3d 233 (4th Cir. 2017)

⁹⁹ *United States v. Sterling*, 818 F. Supp. 2d 945 (E.D. Va. 2011)

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *United States v. Sterling*, 860 F.3d 233 (4th Cir. 2017); Risen, *State of War*, 193.

¹⁰³ *United States v. Sterling*, 860 F.3d 233 (4th Cir. 2017)

¹⁰⁴ Coll, "A Test of Confidence", 1.

¹⁰⁵ Solomon and Wheeler, "The Government's War on Whistleblowers", 14.

to 2002.¹⁰⁶ Sterling has been described as a disgruntled former employee of the CIA who in 2000 filed a discrimination complaint alleging that he had been passed over for assignments due to him being African American.¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, it was Risen who had written publicly about Sterling's discrimination suit in 2002 and subsequent phone and email records established the link between Risen and Sterling as the source.¹⁰⁸ Additionally, Sterling had met with two Senate Intelligence Committee staffers surrounding the program in 2003 to bring light to his firing as well as the operation.¹⁰⁹ Sterling was charged with 10 felony counts in 2008 and prosecuted under the Espionage Act by the Obama administration for providing the classified intelligence regarding Operation Merlin.¹¹⁰ Among the information that Sterling provided was a classified memorandum outlining the program.¹¹¹ His subsequent conviction and appeal illustrated not only the seriousness of the breach, but also evidenced the approach the Obama administration was taking on leaks given high profile exposures from Snowden, Manning, and others.¹¹²

Operation Olympic Games

U.S. foreign policy in the 21st century has undoubtedly been shaped by the events of September 11th, 2001. The loss of life and the devastation caused by Al-Qaeda gave rise to the U.S. "War on Terror" and the elevated military and intelligence activity surrounding the Middle East. Terrorism demonstrated its devastating potential to pierce the veil of safety in the homeland and the strategic threat that unchecked rogue terrorist groups could be to U.S. national security. Iran, in the immediate aftermath of Al-Qaeda's attack, opened lines of communication and

¹⁰⁶ *United States v. Sterling*, 860 F.3d 233 (4th Cir. 2017)

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ Solomon & Wheeler, "The Government's War on Whistleblowers", 14.

¹¹⁰ Ellison, "The Man who Kept the Secret", 2.

¹¹¹ *United States v. Sterling*, 860 F.3d 233 (4th Cir. 2017)

¹¹² Ellison, "The Man Who Kept the Secret", 3.

assisted in the targeting and capture of parties responsible.¹¹³ However, this did not prevent President Bush in his 2002 State of the Union from including Iran as a member of the “axis of evil” due to its proclivity for state sponsorship of terrorism, covert pursuit of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and human rights abuses.¹¹⁴

The military action in Afghanistan and the subsequent invasion of Iraq demonstrated the aggressive posture of the Bush administration in the “War on Terror”.¹¹⁵ However, failure to produce evidence of Iraq’s WMD program following the invasion hurt public support for the administration. Despite International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reports regarding a covert nuclear weapons program in Iran, the administration needed alternatives to direct military intervention.¹¹⁶ The administration increasingly relied on special operations forces under Title 10 and covert action.¹¹⁷ Additionally, through the Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF) passed in 2001, the administration was able to conduct targeted assassinations via the CIA Predator drone platform carrying Hellfire missiles.¹¹⁸ This legal authorization removed the precedent set in the 1976 Executive Order signed by President Ford which banned assassinations.¹¹⁹ Instead, terrorist targets were considered enemy combatants who posed imminent threats to U.S. military forces and thus were legitimate targets.¹²⁰

Although there is not space within the context of this case to address the warrantless wiretap program, there was expansion of state security in the context of combatting terrorism which eroded the freedoms and privileges of the U.S. populous and gave leeway to the

¹¹³ Morgan, “U.S. – Iran Relations”, 8.

¹¹⁴ President George W. Bush, *2002 State of the Union Address*.

¹¹⁵ President George W. Bush, *2002 State of the Union Address*.

¹¹⁶ Rezaei, “Nuclear Proliferation and Rollback: The Complex Case of Iran”, 613-632.

¹¹⁷ Wall, “Demystifying the Title 10-Title 50 Debate”, 85-142.

¹¹⁸ Grace, “Targeting U.S. Citizens in the Fight Against the Islamic State”, 1456.

¹¹⁹ Lowenthal, *Intelligence: From Secrets to Policy*, 176.

¹²⁰ Thomas et al. “U.S. Killing of Qasem Soleimani: Frequently Asked Questions”, 14.

Intelligence Community.¹²¹ It was in this context that several covert actions were implemented with Operation Olympic Games being notable for the evolution and inclusion of cyber information warfare toolkits.¹²² Operation Olympic Games was launched in 2006 with an intent on slowing the advancement of Iran's covert nuclear program through advanced development of malware and other targeted cyber-weapons.¹²³ This program was partially initiated following failure to prove the presence of WMDs in Iraq and to prevent Israel from taking more drastic action in bombing Iranian nuclear infrastructure as they had done to Iraq in 1980.¹²⁴ Furthermore, the utilization of a cyber covert action allowed for lower probability of retaliation and increased deniability to the U.S. barring major intelligence leaks like those from NSA contractor Edward Snowden.¹²⁵ The combination of Israeli intelligence regarding Iranian nuclear infrastructure and the joint cyber capabilities of the U.S. and Israel allowed for development of the virus now known as Stuxnet.¹²⁶

Stuxnet derived its name from security researchers at Kaspersky's lab who first discovered and released findings regarding the virus.¹²⁷ Although the U.S. and Israel never officially acknowledged their role, the determination from researchers looking at the source-code was that it was jointly written by Israel and the U.S. to target a specific industrial supervisory control and data acquisition (SCADA) system which ran "Siemens Simatic Step 7" software.¹²⁸ This targeting of SCADA systems was unique because it allowed for targeted damage to be done to the Iranian nuclear facility at Natanz while leaving other systems it infected unharmed

¹²¹ Ellison, "The Man Who Kept the Secret", 106.

¹²² Menon, "Operation: Olympic Games", 68.

¹²³ Ibid., 68.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 68.

¹²⁵ Chovančík, "Iran Coercion Success and the Use of Non-kinetic Tools", 266

¹²⁶ Menon, "Operation: Olympic Games", 68.

¹²⁷ Berghel, "A Farewell to Air Gaps", 65.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 67.

representing one of the most advanced precision cyber-weapons ever uncovered.¹²⁹ The virus once circumventing the air gapped systems at Natanz were able to alter the speed of centrifuges to not only destroy the centrifuges but also spoil the enrichment activity while reporting normal operating conditions to the controller.¹³⁰

Ultimately, over 30,000 IP addresses were infected via Stuxnet demonstrating advanced capabilities of precision targeting by the U.S. and Israelis.¹³¹ Although, the IAEA had noted in reports the destruction and damage of between 1,000 to 2,000 centrifuges at Natanz and confusion amongst Iranians regarding the underlying cause, the role of the virus was unknown at the time.¹³² The ability to inflict physical destruction through a cyberattack opened the doors for a suite of future covert action.¹³³ Although Stuxnet was exposed, it represented a major step forward in precision cyber-weapons and allowed for disruption of the Iranian nuclear program pushing Iran towards the subsequent nuclear deal reached in 2015. Without the combination of Operation Olympic Games, sanctions against Iran, underlying propaganda efforts, and overt pressure from the U.S. it is potentially unlikely that the moderate President Rouhani would have been elected. Furthermore, it is plausible that Iran would have already developed nuclear weapons.¹³⁴

Targeted Assassination of Qasem Soleimani

The Obama administration sought to narrow the focus of engagement in the Middle East and seeking to recall troops after an increasingly costly Iraq War. While Obama pulled out of

¹²⁹Lindsay, “Stuxnet and the Limits of Cyber Warfare”, 366.

¹³⁰ Chovančík, “Iran Coercion Success and the Use of Non-kinetic Tools”, 266

¹³¹ Ibid., 266.

¹³² Morgan, “U.S.-Iran Relations”, 9.

¹³³ Lindsay, “Stuxnet and the Limits of Cyber Warfare”, 366.

¹³⁴ Rezaei, “Nuclear Proliferation and Rollback: The Complex Case of Iran” 613–632.

Iraq and created a vacuum which would create the environment under which ISIS emerged, he was continuing to heavily utilize covert actions which had begun under previous administrations such as the Predator program and Operation Olympic Games. The armed UAV Predator program was able to circumvent the ban on assassination put into place under President Ford's 1976 Executive Order through language in the AUMF which justified the killings as assassinating targets engaged in terrorism which posed immediate danger to U.S. citizens and personnel.¹³⁵ This same legal justification would underpin the Finding which authorized the drone strike on Qasem Soleimani.

Obama's policy in the Middle East sought to distance the U.S. from Israel to improve relations with Iran. With Iran, he focused almost exclusively on the issue of proliferation choosing to not allow sponsorship of terrorism or human rights violations prevent a deal from being reached.¹³⁶ The creation of daylight between the U.S. and Israel was pivotal in rapprochement towards Iran to tamp down conflict between the two adversaries.¹³⁷ This effort to bring Iran to the table was meant to minimize the risk associated with their civilian nuclear program which many viewed as a thinly veiled cover for a covert military program due to the overwhelming oil abundance and lack of need.¹³⁸ The combination of sanctions against Iran, overt pressure, and success of covert action via Operation Olympic Games helped coerce Iran to agree to what would become the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).¹³⁹ Signed on 14

¹³⁵ Thomas et al., "U.S. Killing of Qasem Soleimani: Frequently Asked Questions", 14.

¹³⁶ Continetti, "The End of Obama's Middle East", 9.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 10.

¹³⁸ Friedman, "Confronting Iran", 36.

¹³⁹ Rezaei, "Nuclear Proliferation and Rollback: The Complex Case of Iran", 613-632.

July 2015, the JCPOA outlined limitations and restrictions on Iran's nuclear program in return for the lifting of economic sanctions.¹⁴⁰

To understand how the Trump administration, just five years after the signing of the Iran Deal, arrived at authorizing via a Finding the targeted assassination of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Major General Qasem Soleimani it is important to recognize the difference in Presidential policy.¹⁴¹ The Trump administration conducted a more aggressive foreign policy towards Iran as well as Russia and China what is colloquially termed Great Power Competition. Furthermore, the Trump Administration focused on defeating radical elements such as ISIS which had emerged under the Obama administration, but also was keenly focused on keeping nation-state adversaries in check to protect U.S. hegemonic position. The targeted assassination of Qasem Soleimani was a departure from long-established U.S. foreign policy by holding Iran accountable for the actions of proxy groups it funded and supported.¹⁴²

The roots of this shift in policy began when Trump ascended office, but took formality in the issuance of NSPM-11 which withdrew from the 2015 JCPOA agreement citing Iran's lack of compliance, state sponsorship of terrorism, and human right violations for reasons why the U.S. would no longer abide by the agreement.¹⁴³ The formal withdrawal from the agreement was one of many escalatory stances the administration took in addressing Iran and combating terrorism in the Middle East. While the Obama administration had been willing to create daylight between the U.S. and Israel, the Trump administration closed that gap and shifted towards a containment policy which harshly punished Iran for its destabilizing effect on the Middle East.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁰ Garwin, "The Iran Deal in Six Minutes", 201.

¹⁴¹ Lee and Kube, "Trump authorized Soleimani's killing 7 months ago", 1.

¹⁴² Schanzer, "Ending Iran's Fictions: What the Soleimani Strike Means", 30.

¹⁴³ Trump, "National Security Presidential Memorandum", 1-3.

¹⁴⁴ Continetti, "The End of Obama's Middle East", 10.

Following withdrawal from the JCPOA, Iran and the United States have been engaged in an increasingly public escalation of both word and action. Iran has postured itself more militarily going so far as to shoot down a U.S. surveillance drone in the Strait of Hormuz; increased support for rogue terrorist elements; and publicly stated its unwillingness to abide by the terms of the JCPOA.¹⁴⁵ The announcement of the downing and the protection of Iran's "territorial integrity" was made by Maj. General Qasem Soleimani in the immediate aftermath.¹⁴⁶ The U.S. through a series of increased sanctions and maximum pressure on Iran has sought to effect change of behavior in the regime beyond nuclear ambition and bring broader peace to the region marred by terror, civil war, and instability.¹⁴⁷ So far, that maximum pressure campaign has strained the finances of Iran and slowed the flow of oil exports.

The escalation between the two reached a peak following a December 27th, 2019 rocket attack by Iran-backed Kata'ib Hezbollah on a military base near Kirkuk which resulted in the death of a U.S. contractor and wounding of six additional servicemembers with four being U.S. military.¹⁴⁸ However, it is important to note that it was not a single killing of a U.S. contractor which resulted in this drastic action, but rather years of harm caused to the U.S. via Iranian proxies.¹⁴⁹ Soleimani had been leading the IRGC from 1998-2020 nearly unchallenged and was a cult hero in Iran, representing a target that would be comparable to the U.S. Secretary of Defense.¹⁵⁰ In a statement released by the Department of Defense following the action against Soleimani, the U.S. Government cited the need to protect U.S. personnel as the underlying

¹⁴⁵ Marcus, "Strait of Hormuz: US confirms Drone Shot Down by Iran".

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Thomas et al., "U.S. Killing of Qasem Soleimani: Frequently Asked Questions", 1.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, 1.

¹⁴⁹ Thomas et al., "U.S. Killing of Qasem Soleimani: Frequently Asked Questions", 1.

¹⁵⁰ Schanzer, "Ending Iran's Fictions: What the Soleimani Strike Means", 30

justification for undertaking the action.¹⁵¹ The Soleimani killing on January 3rd, 2020 was a departure from established U.S. policy and held accountable the decisionmaker who was behind the deaths of over 600 troops and the wounding of thousands more via proxies.¹⁵²

While the decision to assassinate a high-level member of an opposing nation-state seems brash, it is important to note that the Finding which authorized the killing of Soleimani was underpinned by legal foundation in the AUMF, Congressional Oversight, and significant planning on the part of the Intelligence Community and the U.S. military.¹⁵³ The strike on the convoy which Q Soleimani was a part of in the early hours of January 3rd leaving the airport in Iraq minimized the potential risk to non-enemy combatants.¹⁵⁴ Furthermore, by using precision guided missiles fired from a drone platform it reduced risk to potential U.S. personnel engaged in the strike while allowing for specific targeting that was proportional to the mission. Had the U.S. struck Soleimani outside of Iraq it would have lacked the same legal foundation that is present due to his presence in Iraq and underlying support for proxies therein which had caused significant and continuing harm to U.S. personnel.

Discussion

Viewed in concert, the results of covert action in Iran has been a mixture of success and failure with some more recent actions unable to be evaluated from a long-term perspective due to the recency of the action. While some authors would argue that the long-term effect of Operation Ajax was negative, there are significant additional variables introduced across a 26-year period

¹⁵¹ Department of Defense, “Statement by the Department of Defense [Press Release]”.

¹⁵² Continetti, “The End of Obama’s Middle East”, 10.

¹⁵³ Pasquale and Johnson. “Covert Action as an Intelligence Subcomponent”, 33.

¹⁵⁴ Thomas et al., “U.S. Killing of Qasem Soleimani: Frequently Asked Questions”, 1.

to make this definitive. Before exploring the evaluation results of each case, they can be more succinctly represented in the table below.

Table 1:

	Achieved immediate Presidential Policy?	Operational Implementation	Long-Term Strategic Implications
Operation Ajax	Success	Success	Mixed
Iran-Contra	Failure	Failure	Failure
Operation Merlin	Failure	Failure	Failure
Operation Olympic Games	Success	Success	Unknown
Assassination of Soleimani	Success	Success	Unknown

Operation Ajax

Operation Ajax became the blueprint for future covert action efforts in Guatemala and elsewhere due to the level of success achieved.¹⁵⁵ The combined efforts of British SIS and the CIA were able to achieve the desired outcomes of the administration in removing Mossadegh from power, installing the Shah who was friendly to the U.S., and preventing the nationalization of Iranian oil. This thread of concern over the security and access to oil in the Middle East has remained a common theme for U.S. policymakers over the past seven decades and although Operation Ajax predates the Carter Doctrine, its goals harkens to the same philosophic underpinning.¹⁵⁶ Operation Ajax was implemented seamlessly from an operational standpoint in terms of political action, propaganda, and coup d'état coming together as planned. However, Operation Ajax serves as an example of blowback where it fomented the very seeds of the Islamic Revolution which would overthrow the Shah in 1979 and lead to an altered strategic

¹⁵⁵ Little, "Mission Impossible", 666.

¹⁵⁶ Thompson, "The Carter Doctrine", 190.

landscape in the Middle East.¹⁵⁷ There remains 26 years between the installation of the Shah and his fall that includes several other variables.¹⁵⁸ The span of time muddles the retrospective examination and thus it could be argued that the subsequent revolution in Iran was driven by a failure of U.S. policy rather than the single ripple effect of Operation Ajax. The U.S. failure to control the Shah of Iran and turning a blind eye to the actions of powers who were friendly to the U.S. and anti-communist was a downfall of the policies of several administrations during the Cold War years. The singular focus on preventing the spread of communism prevented the U.S. from objectively evaluating those foreign leaders it aligned itself with to the detriment of global perception of U.S. interference in the affairs of others.

Iran-Contra

Iran-Contra remains a black mark on covert action nearly four decades later as a clear example of failure. Firstly, Iran-Contra was a failure in its ability to achieve presidential policy in the short-term. The mixing of policy objectives between support for the Contras in Nicaragua and funneling arms to Iran to foster goodwill to a potential successor to the Ayatollah complicated the actions intent. Furthermore, the decision to run the covert action out of the White House via the NSC to avoid Congressional Oversight and circumvent U.S. law put this action on the side criminal behavior.¹⁵⁹ The sloppiness of the operational implementation is amplified by the fact that Iran leaked the details to the press resulting in Congressional inquiries, substantial backlash, and the passage of new oversight laws directly because of the action.¹⁶⁰ The mixing of poor policy with poor implementation due to the utilization of non-professional

¹⁵⁷ Lomas, "Not-so-secret Operation", 14.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 14.

¹⁵⁹ Woodward "Reagan Ordered Casey to Keep Iran Mission from Congress".

¹⁶⁰ Little, "Mission Impossible", 694.

intelligence officers to run the program significantly endangered U.S. strategic interests and set-back relations between Iran and the U.S. nearly permanently by demonstrating a duplicitous motive.¹⁶¹ Covert action cannot solve poor policy, and the desire to see it make amends in multiple fronts from Iran to Nicaragua was ill-conceived.¹⁶² Lastly, the long-term implications of Iran-Contra are clear in that it has altered the path of covert action by burdening it in additional oversight as well as doing little to change the course of U.S.-Iran relations long-term. The Ayatollah Khomeini remains in power with a populace which is still fervently opposed to the United States meaning that little has changed over the course of the past four decades and Iran-Contra shoulders much of that blame.

Operation Merlin

While the overall accuracy of the exposed material of Operation Merlin cannot be verified because of existing classification, it represented a significant breach to a program which failed on multiple fronts. Although the blueprints were meant to be flawed to sabotage the program, the action was an operational failure due to the easy identification. Therefore, it is possible that the blueprints harmed U.S. security interests by providing valuable information to Iran's nuclear program in the midst of sanctions implementation.¹⁶³ Additionally, the exposure once made public was embarrassing to an administration which was already dealing with Risen's exposure of the warrantless wiretap program as well as a failure to produce evidence of WMDs in Iraq.¹⁶⁴ Although Operation Merlin was implemented under the Clinton administration beginning in 1997, its exposure coincided with growing distrust and angst amongst the American

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 694.

¹⁶² Walcott and Greenberger, "Reagan's Fondness for Covert Action Threatens his Activist Foreign Policy".

¹⁶³ Solomon and Wheeler, "The Government's War on Whistleblowers", 18.

¹⁶⁴ Ellison, "The Man Who Kept the Secret", 5.

public surrounding U.S. intervention in the Middle East.¹⁶⁵ In summary, Operation Merlin failed in terms of short-term policy to sabotage the Iranian nuclear program; failed in operational implementation due to poor conception of the covert action; and failed in regard to long-term policy objectives of preventing Iran's nuclear ambition.

Operation Olympic Games

Operation Olympic Games which gave rise to the likes of cyber information warfare tools such as Stuxnet was a successful covert action in short-term policy, operational implementation, and long-term policy objectives. Although the Trump Administration subsequently pulled out of the JCPOA via NPSM-11, the Stuxnet virus was successful in sabotaging the centrifuges at Natanz and slowing the nuclear weapons development of Iran.¹⁶⁶ Additionally, it demonstrated a substantial advancement in cyber operation capabilities by bypassing air gapped systems and harming only the intended target of industrial computers at Natanz.¹⁶⁷ The key observation of Operation Olympic Games is that it allowed for the development of a suite of cyber information warfare tools which allow for highly targeted penetration and sabotage operations.¹⁶⁸ The ability to target exactly, while limiting periphery damage, is key in keeping any cyber covert action clearly aligned with short-term and long-term policy objectives while also maintaining a level of plausible deniability.¹⁶⁹ Although subsequent leaks of U.S. cyber capabilities by Edward Snowden and others have compromised operational security there is undoubtable progress made

¹⁶⁵ Pincus, "Twisted view of CIA's Operation Merlin".

¹⁶⁶ Chovančik, "Iran Coercion Success and the Use of Non-Kinetic Tools", 266.

¹⁶⁷ Berghel, "A Farewell to Air Gaps, Part 1", 64.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 67.

¹⁶⁹ Chovančik, Martin. 2016. "Iran Coercion Success and the Use of Non-Kinetic Tools, 265.

in the advancement of information warfare in the covert action toolkit to assist presidential policy.¹⁷⁰

Targeted Assassination: Qassim Soleimani

The targeted assassination of IRGC-QF Commander Qasem Soleimani represents a success of both short-term policy and operational implementation.¹⁷¹ However, it is too soon to know the long-term policy implications and whether that will result in increased Iranian hostilities or further desires to develop nuclear weapons as a deterrent long-term. The willingness to assassinate a high-level target in Soleimani was a divergence from prior policy positions and holds Iran accountable for the actions of its proxies.¹⁷² Additionally, the subsequent announcement on January 10th, 2020 announcing new sets of sanctions against Iran further demonstrated the foreign policy posture of the administration to hold Iran accountable and punish them for their actions.¹⁷³ The response of Iran in the immediate aftermath in launching a missile attack which resulted in no loss of life demonstrated restraint by the Iranians and a simultaneous acknowledgement of their weaker military position by having a “proportional” response.¹⁷⁴ This is not to say that this action could not lead to a future event of more significant magnitude. Since the action only took place less than a year ago, it is too premature to evaluate the long-term consequences of the assassination but it does shift the trajectory long-term by resetting expectations between Iran and the U.S. in-line with the strategy of maximum pressure.

¹⁷⁰ Ellison, “The Man Who Kept the Secret”, 3.

¹⁷¹ Schanzer, “Ending Iran’s Fictions: What the Soleimani Strike means”, 30.

¹⁷² Schanzer, “Ending Iran’s Fictions: What the Soleimani Strike Means”, 30.

¹⁷³ Thomas et al., “U.S. Killing of Qasem Soleimani: Frequently Asked Questions”, 4.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 3.

Conclusion

Covert action cannot replace bad policy, but it can amplify the impact of well-thought out and solid policy. The United States does not have the privilege of abandoning covert action for a gentleman's understanding of being above board and by-the-rules with adversaries such as Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea. The U.S. must make every effort to utilize every tool in its disposal. Understanding the inherent, albeit complicated value of covert action, is pivotal in the strategic calculus of foreign policy and global politics. While evaluation is hampered by classification restrictions by outsiders in the academic community, the use by presidential administrations of covert action as a policy instrument can be successful if the Finding which underpins the action is well-defined, bracketed in scope, and has high likelihood of operational success. Overly complex policies and covert actions where the action is attempting to buoy a failing policy will rarely be successful, and thus it would be wise for administrations to only utilize covert action in furtherance of defined objectives.

A framework for examining how covert action contributes to short-term policy objectives, long-term policy objectives, and operational implementation gives a more fulsome evaluative criterion from which to understand success or failure. Ultimately, does it matter if a covert action was flawless in its tradecraft if it did nothing to further the policy objective it was meant to support? In the same vein, policy objectives must be achievable otherwise covert action is no better than no action. Overt policy and covert action work in concert to magnify the desired effect and so as overt policy is continually held up to the microscope by the public audience so too must covert action be evaluated in the appropriate realm to make sure that the parallel track remains in line. Covert action should and will remain an essential element of U.S. foreign policy and at the ready for any presidential administration who seeks to maximize their objectives.

Further exploration of this topic area could be conducted in a follow-on dissertation or book. Due to the scope of this study, the narrative depth of the case study would benefit from expanded discussion in which the details allow for further insight to emerge particularly in regard to policy background, Presidential administrations, history of Iran, and the actions of Israel in Iran. Although the academic community is limited in its access to classified data, it would be worthwhile in exploring the usefulness of an evaluative framework to shape unclassified thought and discussion regarding covert action. The continued pace of covert action, whether by Israel or the U.S., in Iran demonstrates the importance to both present discussion in the defense and intelligence communities but also in the academic community. Covert actions place in U.S. policy is unlikely to subside and thus it must be further understood and evaluated.

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Curriculum Vitae

SUMMARY

As an employee of The Mitre Corporation, Mr. Bowden has served in a variety of financial and operations roles. Those roles have allowed for significant engagement with various government sponsors and ad hoc assignments in research, strategy, and presentation. The most current role as a Senior Counterterrorism Strategist involves academic and policy research to best advise the sponsor on how to address existing, emergent, and future terrorist threats. Prior to working at The Mitre Corporation, Mr. Bowden spent a year as a Graduate Assistant under Dr. George Young at Liberty University. There he conducted research in the field of economics and finance focusing on the 2008 Subprime Mortgage Crisis. Prior to this Mr. Bowden was an NCAA Division 1 Athlete in the sport of Football and both Virginia Tech and Liberty University.

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

The MITRE Corporation – McLean, VA

Senior Counterterrorism Strategist	September 2020 – Present
Division Operations Lead	October 2018 – September 2020
Lead Program Control Analyst	March 2018 – September 2018
Senior Program Control Analyst	April 2016 – February 2018
Government Programs & Pricing Specialist	June 2015 – April 2016

Liberty University, Overton School of Business – Lynchburg, VA

Graduate Assistant	August 2014 – July 2015
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Assisted in the teaching of accounting, economics, corporate finance, and real estate finance courses to over 600 undergraduate students. Served as Graduate Assistant to Dr. George Young who was the recipient of the 2014 – 2015 President’s Award in Teaching Excellence (top professor at Liberty University). Contributor to Dr. Young’s presentation at the Liberty University School of Law Symposium on October 17, 2014 on the topic of Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act. Provided analytic support to the Office of Student Entrepreneurship through proposal evaluation and tracking. Led team research project for an international foreign exchange firm over 8-weeks which was successfully presented to the CEO illustrating opportunities for revenue growth through untapped international student markets in the United States. Conducted graduate level research on various topics such as foreign exchange, Russian oil markets, international economic risks, the Greek Sovereign Debt Crisis, and the 2008 Subprime Mortgage Crisis.

EDUCATION

M.A. – Global Security Studies: *Strategic Studies*

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Liberty University, August 2015

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HIGHLIGHTED COURSEWORK – Johns Hopkins University

Nuclear Proliferation and Nonproliferation

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HONORS and ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- 20 SPARK Awards (Peer Recognition), The MITRE Corporation: 2016 – 2020
- Liberty University (2012 – 2013) – Athletic Scholarship
- 2nd Team Big South All-Conference (2012) / Preseason All-Big South 1st team (2013) / 3 Time Big South Special Teams Player of the week (nominated 6 times – 2012/2013)
- Liberty University 50th Anniversary Dream Team – Football, Honorable Mention 2020
- Big South Presidential Honor Roll: 2012 – 2013
- Atlantic Coast Conference Honor Roll: 2009 – 2010
- Virginia Tech Athletic Director Honor Roll: 2009 – 2010
- Virginia Tech Deans List: 2009 – 2010
- Recipient of the following scholarships in 2009: Robert C. Clark Memorial; Westfield HS Athletic Booster Club; and Westfield HS Orchestra Booster Club